

## Leading in the Post-Socialist Situation: A View from Within

On February 18, 2013, an open lecture on “Leading in the Post-Socialist Situation” was hosted by the Faculty of Political Science “Roberto Ruffilli”- University of Bologna, within the framework of the international *Interdisciplinary Master’s in East-European Studies- M.I.R.E.E.S.* 50 students pursuing the M.I.R.E.E.S. program had the opportunity to attend a lecture delivered by Prof. Sam Potolicchio, lecturer of Politics and Public Policy at Georgetown University, D.C. who was named *One of the Best Professors in America for 2012* by the Princeton Review and the *Best Professor in the Political Communication Field*. As a Senior Political Advisor to several Governments in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia, Potolicchio has coached multiple politicians around the globe along with post-soviet dignitaries as part of his teacher’s engagement with the Library of the U.S. Congress. Potolicchio also teaches undergraduate and graduate level students with a pool of students taught from 140 different countries until present day. His leadership lectures have been delivered in over 100 different universities in 40+ countries with University of Bologna being the first host in Italy. Potolicchio is also a founder and academic director of the global Preparing Global Leaders network of leadership schools with programs in Washington D.C. (GLP), Moscow (PGLS), Skopje (PGLI), and Amman (PGLIA).



Members Room, Library of Congress. Jefferson Building. Washington D.C. Photo by Aleksandr Vlasenko.

Potolicchio was introduced by prof. Stefano Bianchini, Academic Director of M.I.R.E.E.S. Bianchini delivered opening remarks on the work and rich expertise of the guest speaker and the importance of learning first-hand from experts that have been directly involved in or advised on policy-making issues and the (re)establishment of multi-party system and democratic practices in former soviet states or additionally, countries that have been and/or still are under a one-party rule or Monarchy as is Potolicchio's experience with the leadership in the Middle East.

The lecture started with a famous psychology quiz on "selective attentiveness" with students challenged to count exchanges between one of the two differently colored teams. Exchanges were more or less counted accurately, however, the majority failed to identify the unexpected object that literally passed in front of their eyes but was, nevertheless, beyond the given assignment and therefore, completely disregarded. Potolicchio reflected on this phenomenon as quite natural for humans to behave within the frameworks of an entitled task, but stressed that successful leadership must have a *panoramic view* on all events happening within and beyond given context so that the authentic reality is embraced and acted upon. Unfortunately, former soviet leaders did not incorporate all the variables when leading, both domestically and internationally, leaving the countries backward and with highly distorted political and economic systems. Therefore, what he teaches politicians both in the post-soviet block and in the USA, is to be highly attentive of changes and keep updating the systems so that once changes are embraced, the system would readjust to the new situation reaching, this way, a new equilibrium. He refers to the system as a living body that must remain fluid and receptive to changes as this is what drives development and elicits sustainability. Acknowledged was the fact also that even the greatest leaders cannot be fully able to detect all possible variables, however, a good leader forms and also relies on a team of specialized experts and advisors whose ideas may not always go in line with leader's initial stances on a given issue. This ability to adapt to and act upon recommendations coming from a subordinate body, was for the most part not recognized in the leadership of the former soviet countries, and thus it must seriously be taken into consideration when leading in the post-socialism situation so that mistakes from the past are prevented from reoccurring.

The second test addressed the cognitive deficit in visualizing things that are most appropriate to one's upbringing or social context one has lived and/or worked for the most of his/her life. One situation can be interpreted differently by different nationals, or, what was the case with multiethnic societies, by different ethnicities within a country. The importance here is never to leave one's theories unquestioned and not opposed to whatever arguments might the opponent have. This second ingredient Potolicchio termed as *opposable minds* indispensable for the creation of unbiased picture of reality and calling for an enhanced cooperation between adversaries. Quoting "Teach me your minds" imperative, Potolicchio went on to conclude that one of the major problem he encounters in the post-socialist countries is the lack in communication between political parties and leaders of opposing political blocks, something that was left as a heritage from the one-party system and

long tradition of a firmly established political discipline where questioning, rethinking, or criticism of the Communist ideology was completely out of question.

This can be also interpreted from a reverse point of view where misconceptions are created in such ways that the opposite to what one is trying to change is seen as the most appropriate fit i.e. replacement. Potolicchio stresses that it is extremely dangerous to think that a giant leap from one system to another will prevent past things from reoccurring and society will immediately embark on the right trajectory. He illustrates this with an episode from the “West Wing”, a famous political show in the US, where Belarusian delegation is hosted by American government advisors with the attempt to learn how to implement the US model of Constitution and Presidential system in the newly independent Belarus. Potolicchio also faced the same challenge and referred to multiple examples where he is invited to teach on best methods how the American system can be imported in the newly created country without questioning whether this is feasible and whether this will, in fact, prove successful in the long run for small states recently conceived out of a rigid centralized rule with a power concentrated in the hands of a small elite.

The last test was brought up to illustrate the cognitive biases produced by first- impression and appearance. Although Potolicchio's main job entails training politicians on successful delivery of persuasive speeches and the development of one's charisma indispensable for winning electorate's fondness, he nevertheless let the students aware that this can be highly misleading. How one performs and what language one uses does not mean that he/she is a good leader too, as was and is the case with leaders of many countries in the world where the leadership transformed into personality cults and authoritarian regimes. In fact, extroverts and politicians that can better communicate with the people are less likely to produce successful policies unlike introverts who are naturally better observers, act less impulsively, and reflect more extensively.

Overall, Potolicchio advised students to be better thinkers and try to overcome cognitive biases and deficits by being better informed, more exposed to contrasted ideas, welcoming of international exposure and attentive to politicians' attempts to take advantage of these cognitive shortcomings.

The lecture concluded with a productive Q/A session where students inquired about specific regimes and/or political figures and Potolicchio's experience with them, including his observations to the contemporary and forecasts for the future developments on the international scene.